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Uncertain 2018 Elections as Redistricting Battles Rage On

By Colin Campbell, Monday, January 29, 2018

RALEIGH -- Trying to make sense of all the redistricting action in North Carolina this month? Good luck with that. We're now at a point where lawsuits and legislative actions have resulted in a scenario where most of the 2018 election contests are uncertain. You can run for office, but you won't know for sure who your voters are.

Congressional races? There's a chance the U.S. Supreme Court might throw out the current districts as partisan gerrymanders. Legislative races? We're waiting on SCOTUS for that too -- to settle the dispute over whether we'll be using the legislature's districts or ones drawn by the court-appointed "special master."

That leaves the judicial races. Legislators are taking their time in crafting new districts for District Court and Superior Court. Every month, a legislative committee rolls out new proposed maps for how we might elect local judges.

Republicans explain that their maps are an improvement over the current judicial districts, where the district populations vary wildly and clutter up ballots in urban counties with a ton of judicial races. Democrats argue that the changes are designed to benefit Republicans while drawing incumbent judges -- many of them African-American -- out of their current districts.

Republicans keep tweaking the proposed new districts and it's unclear when -- or if -- a proposal will make it to the House and Senate floor for a vote. Meanwhile, the same committee continues to talk about dropping judicial elections altogether and creating an appointment system for judges.

That idea seems to be losing steam. It was discussed for all of five minutes at the last meeting, and my guess is that appointing judges would be a hard sell. Such a sweeping change would require voters to approve a constitutional amendment, and polling shows voters are reluctant to give up their rights to vote for stuff.

So that leaves legislators trying to redraw judicial districts while the fate of their other redistricting maps remains uncertain. Can lawmakers draw funky-shaped districts to help their political party win more seats? The Supreme Court will decide. To what extent should race factor in, and can a court mandate its own maps when it finds fault with the legislature's plan? The Supreme Court will decide.

All this uncertainty about what's legal probably explains why legislators are extremely tight-lipped about what criteria they're using to craft the new judicial maps. Rep. Justin Burr, R-Stanly and the chief architect of the proposal, will say only that he drew the maps to give each district a similar population.

Back when lawmakers redrew congressional maps in 2016, they were honest about their motivations: Draw districts that would elect 10 Republicans and three Democrats. The same principle seems to apply to the judicial proposal, but legislators won't say it out loud: They need plausible deniability if the Supreme Court decides that's not OK.

Take Buncombe County, for example. Now that District Court and Superior Court ballots have party labels, the current countywide election system in this left-leaning county will likely put Democrats on the bench. The latest proposed maps split Buncombe into three districts, two of which have strongly favored Democrats in past elections and one of which favors Republicans. Each of the left-leaning districts would get to pick two District Court judges, while the lucky folks in the GOP district would pick three.

That looks like gerrymandering. But Republicans could argue that because nearly 40 percent of Buncombe voters backed Donald Trump in 2016, a system that ensures 43 percent of the county's judges are Republicans is perfectly reasonable.

The legal uncertainty also could explain why the legislature hasn't released data showing how incumbent judges would be impacted in the new districts. Without official numbers available, a reporter for the liberal N.C. Policy Watch used public records to figure it out. Her reporting found that 64 incumbent District Court judges, or 24 percent of incumbents, would be double-bunked with other judges in the latest maps. Of those, 32 percent are African-American and 73 percent are registered Democrats.

Sen. Joel Ford, D-Mecklenburg, says the maps split his county into two districts, a predominantly black district and a predominantly white district. Does that mean the proposal is a racial gerrymander? Is it a partisan gerrymander? Can they do that?

If the redistricting plan passes, a lawsuit from left-leaning groups is almost guaranteed. And the outcome of that lawsuit will depend on what the U.S. Supreme Court decides in the other cases in the coming months.

Colin Campbell is editor of the Insider State Government News Service. Follow him at NCInsider.com or @RaleighReporter. Write to him at ccampbell@ncinsider.com.

Don't miss Friday's Domecast -- Domecast No. 135: Cooper and Forest's campaign disclosures -- from the Under the Dome team at The News & Observer. Follow Domecast on SoundCloud, iTunes or on your podcast provider of choice.

Lead With Mind, Not Chin

By John Hood

January 29, 2018

RALEIGH -- Roy Cooper is an experienced and capable politician. So far, his approval ratings are fine. But he's hardly made of iron, or even Teflon. Inviting easy attacks on him is foolish. And in recent weeks, foolish is precisely the right description of the strategy the governor's political team and partisan allies have pursued. Understandably giddy about recovering the governor's mansion in 2016, the North Carolina Democratic Party has been looking for "good news" stories to characterize Cooper's first year in office. "NC sees recent flurry of

economic expansion thanks to Gov. Cooper," a party news release claimed in late December. "The 'Jobs Governor' has been hard at work advocating for our state and its citizens and our local economies since taking office." Oh? If Roy Cooper is our "Jobs Governor," why has job creation slowed down under his administration? According to the latest Bureau of Labor Statistics data, North Carolina added 75,000 net new jobs in 2017. Every new job is welcome, naturally, but North Carolina added 94,000 jobs in 2016, 101,000 jobs in 2015, and 95,000 jobs in 2014.

Expressed as an annual rate of employment growth, North Carolina's gain of 1.7 percent in 2017 is a drop from the 2.2 percent rate in 2016. In fact, it is the lowest growth rate since 2011. Employment growth rates for the nation as a whole and the Southeastern region were also lower in 2017 than in 2016, but the drop wasn't as pronounced as it was in our state.

Another standard measure of economic performance is gross domestic product. The data lag a bit more, but through the first nine months of 2017, North Carolina's annualized, inflation-adjusted growth rate was just 1.6 percent, compared to an average of 2.4 percent for the nation and 2.3 percent for the Southeast.

Once again, that represents a markedly lower rate of growth during Cooper's first year than the rates North Carolina experienced during Pat McCrory's tenure as governor, when real GDP growth usually outpaced the national and regional averages. Indeed, in 2016 North Carolina's real GDP surged by 2.9 percent, vs. a national average of 1.8 percent and regional average of 1.9 percent.

I'm not saying McCrory was personally responsible for all of North Carolina's superior performance in past years, or that Cooper is personally responsible for all of North Carolina subpar performance in 2017. Governors aren't that powerful. What I am saying is that there is no justification for the claim that North Carolina is growing faster and creating more jobs under Cooper.

Another unforced error came last week when the governor announced, finally, that his administration would issue permits to allow the construction of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline through Eastern North Carolina. Because the process took so long, hard-left opponents of the pipeline had reason to hope Cooper would say no. They were furious when he decided (correctly) to say yes.

In an attempt to placate them, however, Cooper made the ludicrous claim that his "goal for North Carolina is complete reliance on renewable energy" but that "[d]uring the time it takes to get us to a full renewable energy future, we will still need to rely on other fuels." No sensible person, and I mean no one, truly believes North Carolina households and businesses can be fully powered by renewables at any time in the foreseeable future. What's worse, the governor accompanied the pipeline permit and his flight of fancy with a "memorandum of understanding" that the power companies would pay \$58 million into an escrow account -- out of which the Cooper administration will spend funds, by executive order and discretion, on "mitigation," "economic development," and "renewable energy projects" outside the General Assembly's constitutional authority over appropriations.

Back in the 1990s, when Roy Cooper was a powerful state senator, legislative leaders abused the budget process with slush funds. Compelling private companies to finance a new slush fund is recklessly foolish. The governor and his team should be leading with their minds, not Cooper's chin.

John Hood (@JohnHoodNC) is chairman of the John Locke Foundation and appears on "NC SPIN," broadcast statewide Fridays at 7:30p and Sundays at 12:30p on UNC-TV.

Good Leaders and Bad Ones

By D. G. Martin

January 2017 #5

We need good leaders more than ever.

In our local schools and businesses and churches. We need them in responsible government positions in our state and at the highest national level.

So, what is good leadership? How do you find it? How do you develop it? And how do you deal with the consequences of bad leadership?

I was thinking of these questions the other day when I stumbled into a meeting sponsored by Chapel Hill's Friends of Downtown organization that had invited Dr. Gerald Bell to make a presentation.

Bell may be best known among North Carolina basketball fans as the author of a popular book about Coach Dean Smith's leadership lessons.

But in the rest of the world, especially the international business community, his organization, Bell Leadership, is known as a leadership developer, coach, and teacher at the highest levels. Its mission "is to help people develop their personal effectiveness and leadership skills to contribute to humankind."

In existence since 1972, the organization based in Chapel Hill has trained over 500,000 leaders in almost 5,000 organizations in over 30 countries.

As part of its training it has developed a detailed personality profile to help its students evaluate their leadership styles, potentials, strengths and weaknesses.

For the Friends of Downtown group, Bell summarized six characteristics of the most highly effective leaders.

1. Achievement. From childhood, Bell says, there is a drive to accomplish. Watch the joy of a child when it finally succeeds in learning to walk. The drive to succeed, to create new things, and to start projects is a healthy attribute of a positive and optimistic leader.

2. Self worth. The feeling that "I am somebody" is a positive trait. Parents who encourage children's courage and dignity in dealing with others promote this value. The best leaders treat others with dignity.
 3. Control. The need for control can be seen in two-year olds and teenagers asserting independence. Gaining self-control through discipline, structure, and clarity can signal someone who is a producer, who hates to waste time.
 4. Pleasure. Contentment and happiness can be positive traits. Parents who teach that it is okay to fail and how to recover from it are giving their children a platform for positive happiness.
 5. Love. We need it. Bell says, "There is a genetic code need for love." He says you can measure how others feel about you by a "seek-me-out-index." How many people seek you out for advice and help when they have a problem? He says that good listening skills draw people to you.
 6. Play. Enjoying play is a trait of a good leader. In fact good strategic planning is playing with ideas.
What about the bad leadership traits?
 1. Performer. They show off, self-promote, and go on overdrive.
 2. Attacker. They are hostile, critical, and getting even, and only happy when they're in a fight. They never apologize.
 3. Rigidity. An "unbender." It is all black or white for rigid people. They order people to do things rather than working with them. Underneath they dislike people. They command and destroy.
 4. Avoider. They are unwilling to take risks.
 5. Pleaser. They are too focused on being nice. They do not communicate directly and reflect a low degree of competitiveness.
 6. Drifter. Like those, Dr. Bell says, who live in Volkswagen vans, they crave freedom but avoid responsibility. Bell asks his students to what degree they possess the six "best leader" behavior patterns and/or the six "worst leader" patterns? Are they "more of an Entrepreneur (best leader) or a Performer (worst leader)? A Team Builder or a Pleaser? A Producer or a Commander?"
- When his presentation was over, I found myself wishing that Bell could take his leadership program to the Congress and the White House.
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D.G. Martin hosts "North Carolina Bookwatch," which airs Sundays at 11 a.m. and Thursdays at 5 p.m. on UNC-TV.

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